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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 GENEVA 002767

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TAGS: [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#) [MNLF](#)

SUBJECT: DUNANT CENTRE FACILITATING PHILIPPINE-MNLF TALKS

Classified By: Humanitarian Counselor Piper Campbell, reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Geneva-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue briefed interested Missions November 2 on its efforts to mediate final implementation of the 1996 peace agreement between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The effort grew out of concern that clashes on Sulu Island in February could undermine the agreement. The parties will launch a "Peace Working Group" November 17 to work on security arrangements. A separate discussion of political issues is expected to resume in January, possibly in Geneva. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) The Geneva-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (formerly the Henri Dunant Centre, or HDC) briefed interested Missions November 2 on its role in mediating talks aimed at completing implementation of a 1996 peace agreement that largely ended 30 years of fighting between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the once-powerful Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Mediation Advisor David Gorman said HDC had become involved at GRP request after battles on Sulu island in February between GRP security forces and a group consisting largely of MNLF fighters left up to 300 people dead and threatened to unravel the 1996 agreement.

¶3. (C) After extensive interviews with the parties involved, Gorman said HDC concluded the February violence had disparate causes. While clan disputes and a general lack of law and order were contributing factors, MNLF grievances over its perceived limited role in implementing the autonomy arrangement provided for by the 19996 peace agreement and over the continued detention of MNLF leader Nur Misuari played an important role. Gorman said HDC's report on the violence and recommendations to the GRP had led to four rounds of direct talks so far this year between the GRP and MNLF and to the formation of the GRP-MNLF Peace Working Group, which will be formally launched on November 17.

¶4. (C) The GRP-MNLF Peace Working Group will include 5 MNLF representatives as well as two representatives from local government bodies and one representative each from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), the Philippine National Police (PNP), and the Social Welfare Department. Under HDC mediation, its goal is to produce a regional security plan to address, among other things, issues such as disarmament and integration of MNLF fighters into government security forces. This effort will take place in parallel with separate discussions of political issues.

¶5. (C) Gorman said HDC expects to convene the next round of political discussions in January, possibly in Geneva. The meeting will have limited objectives, given HDC's hope to include for the first time all five major factions of the MNLF as well as a representative from the Organization of Islamic Conferences (OIC). The goal will be to reach some common understanding of what elements of the 1996 agreement have in fact been implemented and what still needs to be done. The meeting will not address the fate of Nur Misuari, which Gorman said will be discussed in separate meetings in Manila. Based on his meetings with Nur Misuari, GRP officials and MNLF leaders, Gorman thought Nur Misuari's eventual exile might be a mutually acceptable solution.

¶6. (C) Gorman outlined a number of possible pitfalls ahead, including:

- the challenge of ensuring consistency and parity with whatever autonomy and other concessions the GRP eventually grants in its separate ongoing peace negotiations with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)
- the likelihood that the GRP will refuse to roll back changes to the 1996 agreement that it unilaterally imposed under Republic Act 9054, which is a major sore point for the MNLF
- the challenge of coordinating elements of the peace agreements with proposed Philippine constitutional reforms (charter change)
- the problem of MNLF factionalism and the risk of further MNLF splintering.

¶7. (C) Gorman saw some reason for optimism, nevertheless. The MNLF is militarily a shadow of what it once was, with an ageing command, a limited popular base, and the ability to

field at most a few thousand fighters. For its part, the GRP is more concerned about the more powerful rebel groups that have emerged, including the MILF, the Abu Sayaf Group, and the New People's Army. Gorman suggested the GRP is motivated to seek a lasting solution with the MNLF both so that it can focus on these more threatening organizations and to gain favor with the OIC, whose assistance Manila believes it needs in managing relations with the Muslim south.

Cassel